

FALL 2002



The FLAP

News for the Folks of Lake Accotink Park
703-569-0285 www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/accotink



Drought Affects All Creatures Great and Small

Many of us were anxious about the continued drought that plagues this area and though it never came to it, we were on the brink of mandatory water restrictions. No car washing or watering your lawns! For the flora and fauna of Lake Accotink Park and the entire region, the drought is even more serious than these minor inconveniences. A lack of water for a plant, tree or critter could mean life or death.

Plants and animals find ways to adapt in an attempt to survive. Plants conserve water by slowing down their growth and in severe dryness going dormant. As most homeowners know, grass is particularly good at going dormant in dry weather. Trees and shrubs will not put much energy into woody growth and will shed their leaves and fruit early. Native and wild plants are often better equipped at dealing with drought than exotic and commercial strains of plants. Native grasses have deeper root systems than most lawn grasses and can tap deeper water resources. Native plants are also better adapted to local

soils and cyclical and seasonal drought.

Animals conserve water by being less active in the heat of the day. Plant-eating animals, like rabbits and box turtles, can supplement their drinking water by eating more succulent plants. Birds and mammals also conserve water by eliminating or restricting reproduction. Many birds, particularly seedeaters, are much harder hit than mammals and reptiles. They need water for bathing and drinking and cannot substitute other foods with higher water content for their normal seed diet. Since they can move to available water sources, animals don't have to work as hard at conserving water as plants. However, the search for water can force them to risk crossing other animal's territories and increase their encounters with predators, people and cars. This contact can mean an increase in rabies due to fighting over territory or death in a conflict with humans and their cars.

Aquatic creatures have much less opportunity to move around

and find water when their pond or creek dries up. Many insects live in the rocks along stream bottoms when they are immature. As the streams dry up, this living space disappears and the insect larva, which are an important link in the stream food chain, either die or are forced into the deeper, stagnant, oxygen-poor pools. Fish, crayfish and other creatures also move to the deep parts of streams and ponds, but crowding stresses the fish and makes them more vulnerable to predators.

Although some plants and animals are better able to deal with drought, all are stressed by the scarcity of water. Just as with humans, stress makes plants and animals more vulnerable. The stress weakens their defenses against disease, parasites and pollution. One thing to remember, while drought may be deadly to an individual plant or animal, it is part of the process of nature and will strengthen the species as a whole.

For more drought information checkout the web sites on page three of this newsletter.

Accotink's Miniature Wetlands

One of the newest features at Lake Accotink Park is a rain garden. This addition to the park was installed at the south end of the trestle parking lot by Eagle Scout candidate Will Randolph.

A rain garden is a miniature constructed wetland that is designed to intercept rainwater and filter it through the soil and plants in a garden. So, just like big wetlands, rain gardens improve water quality by removing nutrients and pollutants, protect against floods by storing and holding storm water and releasing it slowly, and provide excellent wildlife habitat.

Location is an important aspect to consider when building a rain garden. The easiest way to site a rain garden is to find a place in your yard that is always wet. Another good location would be at the end of a downspout or you can direct downspouts into the garden. One of the things to remember is that while the purpose of a rain garden is to collect and treat rainwater, it does not have to be wetter than an ordinary garden.

The second important aspect of a rain garden is plant selection. By choosing attractive, native plants that can tolerate being wet, but don't need to be wet,

you can build an attractive low-maintenance garden that will also be good for the environment. A short list of plants that fill these requirements are:

iris, hibiscus, cardinal flower, swamp maple, river birch, box alder, button bush, spice bush and all of the shrub dogwoods.

The plants used for Randolph's project were rescued from the island in Lake Accotink.

Come by the park and see our new rain garden or the older garden by the park office.



Wildlife Focus: The Barred Owl

The barred owl is one of the most vociferous of owls. The hooting cat of the north (La Chat-Huant Du Nord) is what French Canadians call it, a name that captures its temperament--seen and heard on its own terms. One of the highlights of the Night Critter Walks, held in March and again in September at Lake Accotink, is the broadcasting by boombox of the barred owl's standard cry, often responded to from nearby trees: whooo-cooks-for-yooo, whooo-cooks-for-yoooo. But it has the widest range of calls of any owl in North America, calls described variously as sounding like monkey squalls, maniacal gibbering, uncouth cackling, barks of distant dogs or the hair-raising cries of alley cats.

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An extremely silent flier, the barred owl can pass within inches of a nightwalking person on the most moonlit of nights and not betray its presence except by a flit of shadow. Or it may decide to appear magically, as it sometimes does rather comically at the edge of campfires, looking on at campers with a soulful expression. Eyes are deep-set, ink-black or dark brown in color depending on the light. Eye-blinks are slow and its large head seems slightly human: the very picture of an unflappable sage.

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The weight of an adult barred owl is typically around a pound, height averages about 20 inches. Ears lack tufts. It looks swollen and squat at rest, belying the fact that it is one of the most efficient flying predators in the forest. By sound alone, the owl can detect a mouse running over hard ground at 25 yards and hear its faint squeaking at double that distance. The owl streaks to its prey through dense foliage as if it were no bigger than a bat. Smaller prey

(chipmunks, squirrels, bats, shrews, muskrats) are grabbed with its talons, then swallowed whole by the owl, always headfirst. Its night vision is two to three times more efficient than a human's. Only three percent of birds are night hunters, and owls make up half of that percentage.

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When not hunting, the barred owl is genial in temperament. Crows generally cause it the most strife, gang-ing up and tormenting it with swooping dives. The owl eventually recedes deeper into the density of forest. More urgent is an attack by the great horned owl, its mortal



enemy; the barred owl's only hope of escape is an agile flight through tangles of forest.

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Woodlands that border lakes, streams and marshes are ideal habitats for the barred owl. It likes to nest in roomy hollow cavities about 30 feet above ground, but it will roost in the abandoned nests of other birds, sometimes cohabitating in a kind of hot-bunking arrangement with the day-hunting red-shouldered hawk. When the barred owl is forced to build its own nest, it is often sloppily constructed: eggs and even owlets sometimes fall through holes in the nest to the ground. If left alone, an owlet may regain its nest by using its bill and talons to grip the bark, flapping its wings as it stretches to regrip. Adults usually

mate for life.

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Some owls have as many as 10,000 feathers of varying lengths and shapes and densities. Feathers can function independently, and the shape of the wing can be altered during flight. Fortunately, wildlife photography has become very sharp in capturing sublime moments of owl motion. The barred owl is an aesthetic feast for the photographer because of the heavily cross-barred markings on its upper plumage: grayish brown bars separated by narrower whitish bars. This contrasts sharply with the longitudinally striped abdomen. One shake of feathers or any of a hundred motions provide a cauldron of rich, layered colors. Close-up photo shots of the face show exquisitely delicate filigree around the eyes. The leading edges of the flight feathers are finely fluted for fully silent flight.

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Owls are the most ubiquitous icon or symbol of any animal in the world, far surpassing eagles. Owls have always been associated with wisdom and death across many cultures. Before bells tolled, owls hooted, and even the stoic Romans thought death was sure to follow the onslaught of owl shrieks during a thunderstorm. Cavemen painted them on cave walls. Many American Indian tribes believed the bridge between life and death was controlled by the owl and that all souls on the way to the next world had to cross Owl Bridge. (Owl Bridge is one of the unofficial names for the narrow walking bridge up the main trail from the dam at Lake Accotink.)

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Brave nightwalkers should plan to come out to Lake Accotink Park for the next Night Critter Walk, the full moon night in March 2003.

Springfield Community Joins Forces with Park

If you enjoy coming to Lake Accotink Park, but become dismayed by the sight of trash and debris left by careless visitors to the park, you are not alone. As of this writing, a community-wide clean up effort under the banner "Spruce-Up Springfield" is tentatively scheduled to be held this November. Springfield Spruce-up Day builds upon the clean-up effort that traditionally has brought residents, scout troops and other civic-minded individuals out to Lake Accotink Park and adjacent natural areas to participate in clean-up days held twice a year. This year, the clean-up will begin at the park and extend outward into the community. The goal

is to galvanize residents, businesses and community groups to combat the problem of trash and weeds in parks and other common areas throughout Springfield.

Participants in this partnership include Fairfax County Supervisor Dana Kauffman's Office, the Fairfax County Police Department (Franconia Station), the Clean Fairfax Council, Fairfax County Fire and Rescue and the Greater Springfield Volunteer Fire Department, the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services, the Fairfax County Health Department, the Fairfax County Park Authority and the Springfield Civic Association. Other agencies

and organizations intend to join in these efforts.

The clean-up day is intended to serve as a rallying call to all caring citizens: Be part of the solution! Keeping your park clean is a year-round effort and its success depends on everyone. Volunteers are welcome anytime! To join Lake Accotink Park's Clean-Up Patrol, please call the park, 703-569-0285.

Fall Clean-up tentatively scheduled to take place in November

Spring Clean-up is slated for March 15, 2003

Park Profile... Niem Nguyen

Behind the scenery at Lake Accotink Park is a quiet, unassuming man who cares for the park and fixes what needs fixing. Niem Nguyen rises early every day. He is among the first to arrive at the park. Making the rounds, he opens the gates at 7 a.m. and greets the few early visitors who come for the peaceful sounds that nature offers to morning observers. This, in fact, is what Niem likes best about working at Lake Accotink Park: the fresh air, being outside, and putting in a good day's work. Niem's special talents range from repair-



Niem Nguyen,
Maintenance Professional

ing boats and painting the carousel horses, to generally keeping things in good working order. He also has responsibility for mowing and weeding throughout the park. In addition, Niem creates the attractive hand-lettered wooden signs that provide information to park visitors.

Asked what he finds special about Lake

Accotink Park, Niem said, "Many people don't know there's a place right here to spend a nice day with your family. You don't have to drive far." He enjoys watching families come to the park to ride pedal boats, play mini-golf, ride the carousel or just gather for picnics during the off-season.

Niem has worked at Lake Accotink Park since July 1996. He emigrated from Vietnam in 1989 with his wife and daughter. Today they reside in Burke.

Springfield Swimming & Racquet Club Partners with Park for Tennis



Lake Accotink Park will soon have tennis courts, thanks to a unique partnership with Springfield Swimming & Racquet Club. The club owns the tennis courts, located on Highland Avenue just one block from the park main entrance. Under an agreement with the club, Lake Accotink Park has taken on the refurbishment and maintenance of the tennis courts in exchange for use of the courts for tennis classes and as an

additional recreational offering for visitors to the park.

The renovation project has required a significant amount of work by park staff, supplemented by a handful of volunteers. In addition, Lake Accotink Park provided all materials for the improvements, including caulk, paint, stone, cranks and nets. Cracks have been filled in and old paint is being

carefully removed, with a new coat of fresh paint soon to be laid down. Next, new nets will be installed and the fence repaired.

The newly refurbished tennis courts are expected to be ready in the spring. Look to the next edition of *Parktakes* and the *FLAP* for information on spring tennis classes and Spring Break Tennis Camp for youth.

Drought Website Information (Continued from cover page):

<http://md.water.usgs.gov/drought>

<http://www.rangerrick.net/backyardwildlifehabitat/drought.cfm>

<http://climate.virginia.edu/drought.htm>

http://www.mwcog.org/dep/water/supply/current_conditions.htm

**FAIRFAX COUNTY
PARK AUTHORITY**

Lake Accotink Park
7500 Accotink Park Road
Springfield VA 22150

Phone: 703-569-0285
Fax: 703-913-1298
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov>



Lake Accotink Park Needs Volunteers

Opportunities abound at Lake Accotink Park for families, groups, and individuals to lend their talents and even learn new skills while helping to preserve our natural heritage. Volunteers are needed to serve as trail monitors, trout program monitors, landscaping assistants, office assistants, park greeters, and other interesting and rewarding assignments.

To find out how you can get involved, please call Lake Accotink Park at 703-569-0285. Or register online at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/volunteer/accoapp.htm

Dog Tricks Classes at Lake Accotink

Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Of course you can! You might even teach a person a thing or two. Teach your dog to shake, beg, bow, roll over, bring in the newspaper and much more! Dogs must know "sit" and "down" commands and do both with ease.

Dog Tricks class for youth (7 to 15 years old):

5-week class, 45 minutes long, Saturdays at 10 am OR Wednesdays at 7 pm, \$35. Bring your dog's favorite toy and treats!

Dog Tricks class for adults (16 yrs and older):

5-week class, 45 minutes long, Saturdays at 11 am OR Wednesdays at 8 pm, \$35. Bring your dog's favorite toy and treats!



**RAINBOW TROUT FISHING at
LAKE ACCOTINK PARK!**



Child fishes FREE with paying adult
(with this coupon— valid through December 1, 2002)

If you have comments or questions regarding the **FLAP**, or if you are interested in contributing an article please contact:

Zach Myers, Editor
Tawny Hammond, Park Manager
703-569-0285

Upcoming Events & Programs

Art Classes

Brighten your winter! Take an art class at Lake Accotink Park. Choose from Water Color Works, Oil Painting, Discover Drawing and One-Stroke Painting.

For more information please see the winter edition of *Park-takes* magazine or visit www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/parktakes.htm

Or call **Lake Accotink Park** at 703-569-0285.



Pictures with Santa Claus

Date: Saturday, December 14, 2002

Time: 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm

- Ride the Santa Express hay wagon to Santa Land!
- Tell Santa what you want for Christmas
- Get your picture taken in one memorable visit. Bring the whole family!

Cost: Only \$8 per child, moms and dads ride for **FREE!!!** (includes a digital or Polaroid photo)

Pet Pictures with "Santa Claws"

Date: Saturday, December 14, 2002

Time: 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm

Bring your pet to Lake Accotink Park for pictures with "Santa Claws."

- Special vendors displays featuring treats, novelties, and useful information.
- Please register early and please...don't forget your pooper scooper!!

Cost: \$5 per picture

Don't leave your pet out of the holiday picture!!!